

RUDE MECHANICALS AND MINOTAURS:
SHAKESPEARE AND CHAUCER AMONG THE MYTHOGRAPHERS

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A Midsummer Night's Dream is in many respects the most Chaucerian of Shakespeare's plays and it is without doubt the play most closely coincident with a specific Chaucerian work, the Knight's Tale, which it significantly overlaps in language, plot, cast of characters, and theme. I will argue here that the works draw also upon a common mythological background, one that ties the Titania-Bottom episode in Shakespeare to the Pasiphae myth that lies behind the image of the Minotaur in Chaucer. The connection is more than coincidental; it is of thematic importance, incorporating the issues of hierarchy and order that are central to both Chaucer's tale and Shakespeare's play, and consideration of the differing ways the poets employ both myth and theme illuminates elements of the distinction between the worlds the two poets inhabit, separated as they are by the two centuries that mark in England the end of an older world and the beginning of a new.

Scholars have long been attentive to the broader relationships between the two works. J. W. Hales sketched out in 1873 a substantial catalog of parallels, especially structural, and the project has been continued, often enough piecemeal, by many others (see, *inter alia*, Betherum, Bullough, Olson, Coghill, Champion, Muir, Thompson, Melbane, and Greenwood). Harold F. Brooks, in his 1979 Arden edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offered an admirably thorough cataloguing of specific echoes of language. The range of interconnections between the works, on multiple levels, is remarkable indeed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with the preparations for the same wedding that precedes the opening of the Knight's Tale. The Knight's Tale begins with Theseus's return to Athens from the land of Femenye after having conquered the Amazons and married their queen, Hippolyta. Along the way he encounters the suppliant Theban women, who convince him to make war on Creon and ensure the burials of their husbands. After the battle he takes prisoner two young Thebans, Palamon and Arcite, who subsequently fall in love with Hippolyta's

sister, Emily, initiating the Knight's Tale's central story line. As Theseus in the Knight's Tale, then, found himself dealing with a puzzle of loves and rivalries, solution of which would ultimately end in another wedding, that of Palamon and Emily, Shakespeare's Theseus finds himself confronted with an even more intricate set of love relationships that too will end in marriage, this time in multiple weddings—Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena—that will be coincident with his own.

Multiple triangulation of relationships is at the structural heart of each of the works. In the Knight's Tale there is the rivalry of Palamon and Arcite for Emily's love, a grouping, with its concomitant strife, mirrored by the parallel Olympian grouping of Venus, Mars, and Diana, whose own strife must be brought to resolution (by Saturn, who stands outside the triangle) before a consequent resolution can be accomplished on earth (by, partially, Theseus, who, like Saturn, also stands outside the triangle). As both works have an Hippolyta and a Theseus, both have an Egeus as well, but only in Chaucer is he Theseus's father, and his role there is an inversion of that in Shakespeare. In the Knight's Tale Egeus draws upon his wisdom to assuage the sorrow of those who mourn Arcite's death (2837-52). In Shakespeare it is he who, by insisting on his daughter Hermia's marriage to Demetrius, precipitates the flight to the woods and, thus, most of the problems that ensue. The deliberateness with which Chaucer manipulates the interconnections between his triangles—parallel and linked plots, so to speak, the outcome of one depending upon the outcome the other—is indicated by his comic employment of a similar structure in the Miller's Tale, the tale which the Miller himself insists will answer that of the Knight.

The structure of the Miller's Tale suggests that Chaucer remained aware of the intricate structure of the Knight's Tale when he turned to that of the Miller. The triangles in the Miller's Tale, as befits its genre and tone, are predominantly earthly, the multiple rivalries among Absolon, Nicholas, and the husband John for the favors of Alison creating the triangulated groupings of personae that people, respectively, the Noah's flood plot and the plot of the "misdirected kiss." The outcome of one, again, depends upon the outcome of the other, when John, hearing the branded Nicholas's cry of "Water! Water!" (3815), cuts the rope, thinking the flood is coming. Many perceive the implicit presence in the Miller's Tale of a third, scriptural triangle, that of Mary, Joseph, and the Angel of the Annunciation, with

Alison as Mary, her husband as Joseph, and the lodger Nicholas, who amuses himself by singing the Annunciation hymn, *Angelus ad virginem*, as the angel (see Bolton, Kaske, Thro, Gellrich, Ross, and Rowland). If through parody of the Annunciation a divine component is indeed insinuated into the Miller's Tale, it serves as a Christian counterpoint to the triangle of pagan divinities in the Knight's Tale. Chaucer's self-referentiality in the echoing intricacies of the Miller's Tale, whether two-fold or three-fold, highlights the elaborateness of the Knight's Tale's structure, and those complexities were not likely to have been lost upon Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, too, structures *A Midsummer Night's Dream* around triangular plots that overlap in multiple ways and are mutually interdependent in the determination of their outcomes. The chaotic network of pursuits, spurning, and rivalries that characterize the shifting interrelationships among Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia, and Helena is a fluid mass of triangles of shared and shifting corners and lines that might puzzle a Euclid. As Donaldson puts it, Shakespeare took Chaucer's triangles and squared them (36). Lysander loves first Hermia, then Helena, then Hermia again. Demetrius, having been earlier betrothed to Helena, loves Hermia, then Helen. Hermia and Helena alone stay true to the original objects of their affection. Whereas Chaucer's triangles are, relatively, static, Shakespeare's are dynamic. But, just as in Chaucer, Shakespeare's complexes of lovers have also an otherworldly parallel, in this case in the strife between Oberon and Titania—and here, too, triangulation is in evidence, whether suggested in a non-concupiscent sense by Titania's desire to keep, over Oberon's objections, the changeling boy; or suggested comically by Titania's infatuation with the translated Bottom; or suggested more traditionally by the iteration of Titania's past relationship with Theseus or Oberon's with Hippolyta. Finally, with respect to the triangles of mortal lovers, Theseus stands outside them at a concerned remove, just as he did in the Knight's Tale, trying his best to bring about harmony and order. It is worth noting that in both works the conflict that generates plot complication grows out of Theseus's response to a supplicant or supplicants. In the Knight's Tale, Theseus, returning to Athens after his marriage to Hippolyta, meets the Theban women, whose request that he force Creon to give their husbands burial leads to the battle that results in the imprisonment of Palamon and Arcite. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus's request—that Theseus confirm the "ancient privilege of Athens" (1.1.41) and sentence his

daughter either to be put to death or to become a nun if she will not marry Demetrius—results in the lovers' flight to the woods.

Among the numerous parallels between the Knight's Tale and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are profound thematic ones, central among which is the concept of hierarchy. Attempts to establish it, preserve it, enforce it, or rectify it resound from the beginning of each work to its end, with Theseus almost always at the center of the enterprise. Theseus, as viewed through the lens of post-classical tradition, is a figure of extraordinary complexity and contradiction, but the theme of order is rarely absent when he is present, and Chaucer, who shows himself acutely aware of the divergent traditions in works ranging from the *House of Fame* through the *Anelida and Arcita* and the *Legend of Good Women* to the Knight's Tale (Storm, ??), firmly aligns Theseus in the Knight's narrative with what Charles Muscatine long ago called "the principle of order" that he "both invokes and represents throughout the tale" (73; see also Halverson and Green). Reestablishment of traditional hierarchy is implicit in Theseus's signature iconography of Minotaur slain, Feminye conquered, and Hippolyta married, and Theseus's accomplishments in the poem are, appropriately enough, the establishment of the law of the gods over that of man in his conquest of Creon and in the accommodation of human relationships to the ordinance of the gods in his joining of Palamon and Emily in marriage. The theme of order is no less present in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the same decade that produced Muscatine's influential discussion of order in the Knight's Tale, Paul A. Olson addressed the theme in Shakespeare's play, with its multiple movements from discord to harmony, whether between Oberon and Titania or Theseus and Hippolyta, among the young lovers, or within the state or in nature itself. In Shakespeare Theseus's challenges, en route to his thematically significant marriage to Hippolyta, begin with Egeus's call for him to enforce the hierarchy of father over daughter and give marriage of duty precedence over marriage of affection. The success of Theseus's own marriage, Jane K. Brown points out, "is to guarantee not only the order of their own previously less chaste lives, but also that of the world they rule" (28). In the otherworldly subplot, Oberon, like Theseus, sets out to reestablish a hierarchy, that of husband/male over wife/female, as he tries to make Titania obedient to him. Notably—and, I suspect, significantly—attempts in Chaucer to establish hierarchy, while they may lead to only qualified, albeit reasonably satisfying, success, and while they progress through no

shortage of vicissitudes, tend to proceed in relatively straightforward fashion. In Shakespeare, however, the very attempts to create order create the disorder, in consequence of which process order comes to be even more difficult to achieve. Theseus's well intentioned command that Hermia obey fatherly authority drives the lovers to the forest. There they become vulnerable to the confusions of affection that result from the misapplications of Oberon's elixir, itself a nostrum intended to enforce a perceived ideal of order, Oberon having obtained it as part of his own plan to force Titania to bend to husbandly authority (or at least to punish her for not doing so). Chaos, that is, results from both Theseus's and Oberon's attempts to forestall disorder when the recipients of their commands, through waywardness (Hermia and the others) or misapprehension (Puck), make those attempts cross paths.

But while Theseus disposes, while Oberon and Titania maneuver, and while the four young lovers fall in and out of love, a group of laborers, as far from the world of the aristocracy as they are from the world of the fairies, plan their performance of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, an enterprise that will intersect with both of those other alien worlds, in the one case by accident, in the other by design. Most significant will be the meeting of the decidedly earthly subplot of the rustic players with the otherworldly subplot of Oberon and Titania. It is here that Oberon's attempts to establish hierarchy, in conjunction with activities anticipatory of Theseus's ceremonial, nuptial establishment of hierarchy, most dramatically and literally lead to its disestablishment. In Chaucer Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta serves as confirming image of his function as establisher of order. The significance of the marriage is no different in Shakespeare, although in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the union is anticipated, not already accomplished. The rustics—Bottom the weaver and his crew—win the right to honor the duke's nuptials by the performance of their play, which they rehearse in the woods near Athens. Thus Theseus's impending marriage—fraught with its traditional symbolic significance—leads to the rustics' presence in the woods just as Theseus's command to Hermia leads to the presence of the lovers there, where, fighting over prerogative with regard to the fate of the changeling boy, we find Oberon and Titania. Oberon's elixir, intended as punishment for the willful Hippolyta but variously misapplied by Puck among the young lovers, leads to a far more chaotic set of relationships among them than ever Egeus had bewailed before. Further, Titania, too, receives the elixir, after Puck has "translated" Bottom with the ass's head. The result of that translation is

a parodic Minotaur, returning us reflectively to the fundamental iconography of Theseus, the orderer. Setting out to establish order, Oberon has, through the agency of Puck, created, with disorder itself, an iconographic image of disorder, of overturned hierarchy.

It is worth noting that the play of Pyramus and Thisbe wins its place in the nuptial entertainment over a number of competing productions, one of which was to have been "The battle with the Centaurs, to be sung / By an Athenian eunuch to the harp" (5.1.44-45). The reference, as one would expect and as Theseus himself makes clear, is to the battle between the Lapiths and Centaurs, the latter bestial, half-human figures, equine counterparts of the Minotaur, who interrupt the wedding feast of Theseus's friend Pirithous and his bride Hippodamia. The myth anticipates the mechanicals' production in intriguing if muddled ways. Both involve weddings, the one as a narrative element, the other as context and occasion. Theseus, participant in the one, is audience to the other. (In the one, semi-human creatures attempt to part two lovers; in the other, the lovers (one played by a man, Bottom, who earlier was transformed into a semi-human) are parted by a beast played by a human, Snug the joiner as lion.

The Minotaur of classical mythology had its origins, according at least to post-classical mythography, in an episode that itself was commonly interpreted as involving the disestablishment of order, the myth of the adultery of Mars and Venus, commonly seen to represent the weakening and effeminizing of manly virtue by lust. In the accounts of Fulgentius and the third Vatican mythographer, Venus, angry at Helios, the sun, for having discovered her liaison with Mars, inflicted various forms of unnatural passion upon his daughters, Circe, Dirce, Phaedra, Medea, and Pasiphae. Pasiphae's lust for the bull, in turn, led to the conception of the Minotaur (Fulgentius 2.7; Mythographus Tertius 11.6, Bode 231). In the figure of the Minotaur the supremacy of the bestial mirrored the nature of the love that begot it—and mirrored as well that feared overturning of the human by the animal, the reason by the passion, from which Theseus was to be savior. It is a grim, ugly myth, rooted surely in deep, primal fears, and Theseus, as the ruler of civilized, rational Athens, is the ideal figure to serve to turn it in conquest finally to good. Chaucer makes the Minotaur central to the iconography that accompanies Theseus as he takes his place in the Knight's Tale:

[B]y his baner born is his pennoun
Of gold ful riche, in which ther was ybete
The Mynotaur, which that he wan in Crete. (978-80)

Theseus is here returning from the conquest of the Amazons and his marriage to their queen—a marriage symbolic of the hierarchy that has been established in the conquest of the women of “Feminye.” The presence of the Minotaur on that pennon reminds us that Theseus’s mythic career had its start in his conquest of the beast that itself represented the subversion of hierarchy. Significantly, this description occurs immediately after Theseus’s encounter with the Theban supplicants, as he turns toward Thebes to ensure the burial of their husbands, and the emblem appropriately accompanies the hero as he restores hierarchical order to the Thebes of Creon, who has put his law above that of the gods. In consequence, of course, of that very episode, Theseus finds himself confronted with the disordered world of Arcite, Palamon, and Emily.

Central though its significance is, the Minotaur still appears only allusively in the Knight’s Tale. Chaucer knew that his audience could supply the mythological background details, details so “grisly,” to use the Wife of Bath’s term, that she herself pointedly refuses to recount them. She recalls in her Prologue how her husband read to her, from his book of “wikked wives,”

Of Phasipha, that was the queene of Crete,
For shrewednesse, hym thoughte the tale swete;
Fy! Spek namoore—it is a grisly thing—
Of hire horrible lust and hir liking. (733-36)

Chaucer knew, too, that his audience would be aware of the traditional mythographic significance of the story. But grim though the heart of the antecedent myth may be, that grimness is lost in the tone of Shakespeare’s play when Bottom becomes beast in the labyrinth of the Athenian woods. In Shakespeare, it should be observed, the sequence of the mythic infatuation is quite reversed. Pasiphae fell in love with the bull, conceived with the aid of Daedalus, and gave birth to the Minotaur. The anger between Titania and Oberon, with the aid of Puck, gives, in a sense, “birth” to the transfigured Bottom, and it is with that offspring that she falls in love—in scenes so comic that it is easy to ignore the literal bestiality that is at its heart.

Oberon, it should be noted, himself provides oblique allusion to Pasiphae's infatuation when he anticipates the effect the elixir will have once placed on Titania's eyes:

The next thing then she waking looks upon
(Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On meddling monkey, or on busy ape),
She shall pursue it with the soul of love. (2.1.179-82)

It is noteworthy that he speculates solely upon her falling in love with an animal, and it is surely significant that among the animals he includes is the bull. Oberon would, of course, hardly be expected to foresee the hybrid of Puck's creation, but a list of unworthy love-objects less exclusively bestial would not have been unlikely. So too, as Oberon later administers the juice of the flower, he anticipates only animals as the objects of Titania's "true-love"—"ounce, or cat, or bear, / Pard, or boar with bristled hair" (2.2.30-31). What matters is simply that it should be "some vile thing" (2.2.34). Although there are a number of references in his plays to Daedalus, Icarus, and the labyrinth, Shakespeare nowhere refers directly to Pasiphae and only once to the Minotaur (*I Henry VI* 5.3.188-89), with no reference to its engendering. It would be fruitless to speculate whether the omission stemmed, like that of the Wife of Bath, from considerations of delicacy, but surely the obliquity of the reference in the present instance, while it may subtly prepare the audience for the drolly (but clearly) Minotaur nature of Bottom, assists in a lightness of reference that would be destroyed if we were any more directly reminded of what the Wife of Bath calls Pasiphae's "horrible lust." (This may, in fact, account for Oberon's omission of the bull in his second catalog of animals as he pours the elixir on Titania's eyelids.) In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it were, Shakespeare needs the allusion, with its accompanying allegorical significance, but does not need, if he can avoid them, the accompanying unsavory details. I cannot agree with Jan Kott, who, in a reading that seems largely indifferent to tone, overall, finds the play replete with promiscuity (the lovers purportedly having intercourse in the woods) and "the dark sphere of bestiality" (222). There may be matter to Shakespeare's comedy reflective of the matter of the Knight's tale, but it remains comedy nevertheless. That Bottom should have as ass's head and not a bull's is far more conducive to comic effect, even disregarding the bull's mythologic allusiveness. And there is, at any

rate, no evident effort on the playwright's part to avoid reference to Bottom as animal, whether figuratively or ironically ("This is to make an ass of me" [3.1.120-21]; "I am such a tender ass" [4.1.25]; "Man is but an ass" [4.1.206]; "[H]e might yet recover, and yet prove an ass" [5.1.310-11]) or literally ("Titania wak'd, and straightway lov'd an ass" [3.2.34]; "Methought I was enamour'd of an ass" [4.1.77]).

In sum, both poem and play, each centered about the theme of hierarchy, share a central image, straightforward in the one case, parodic in the other, but both heavy with hierarchical significance. One might even suggest that the place in the original myth of the Athenian Daedalus, the great artificer, may be echoed in the occupation of the "rude mechanicals," themselves all Athenian artificers of one sort or another, who accompany Bottom the weaver in the subplot. The appearance in the later work of the demi-human, the minotaural Bottom, more than likely stems both from attentiveness to the earlier work and from an awareness of a common tradition, mythographic as well as mythological. In a sense Chaucer may be seen here as both source and analogue. The works display numerous echoes and parallels, evidence of Shakespeare's debt to Chaucer, and, as well, of the phenomenon of two poets following, each in his own way, the same sources and traditions. Whatever the case, the parallels are perhaps less intriguing than the divergences, most important among which is a major shift in the mechanics by which hierarchical ordering, centrally imaged in Minotaur and translated rustic, comes about. The theme of hierarchy and order is implicit in both Chaucer's poem and Shakespeare's play, and each author reflects the broader working out of that theme in poem and play respectively. Chaucer is more orthodox and linear in his treatment of hierarchy, whereas Shakespeare dramatizes the chaos that comes about from attempts to enforce it. Both works affirm the limitations of human agency in ordering the world, but while Chaucer's treatment of the issue is comparatively straightforward (the defeat of Creon brings Palamon and Arcite to Athens but does not necessitate their infatuation), in Shakespeare all attempts to achieve orthodox hierarchical ordering are, paradoxically, self-subverting. In both the Knight's Tale and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus must, perforce, make do finally with what the gods (or fairies) give him. Chaucer's Theseus finds wisdom in making "vertu of necessitee" (3042). In Shakespeare, mirror of a new world less sure of its bearings than that of Chaucer, there is no talk of wisdom. Even after the web of discord is knitted up in multiple marriages, the whole

enterprise is celebrated with a farce in which the most comic of mistaken impressions results in the least dignified and most pleonastic of deaths, as Pyramus moans, "Now die, die, die, die, die" (5.1.306) and Thisby sobs, "Adieu, adieu, adieu" (5.1.347). Shakespeare discards the Boethian apologetics of Theseus's final speech in Chaucer; his Theseus says instead, simply, "Never excuse; for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blam'd" (5.1.356-57), and Puck, a mischievous fairy granted the last word, fears only such offense as applause can amend.

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